

What's in a Name?

Well..... So your name is Sven..... How did you manage to get that moniker hung on you? Where did you come up with such an aberration?

Hmmm..... (sigh)..... This takes time. It's not something you can just pass off with some smart reply. After all, think about it. How can you derive Sven from Richard?

Well, yes, but you could say the same for Dick. How do you derive Dick from Richard?

That's easy enough. Richard, Rick, Dick. But then again it could have been just as easy to come up with Richard, Retch, Retch, Vomit. Vomit Engblom. Now that has a certain up-chuckling ring to it. But, I'm getting off the point here. Sven does not relate.

As we pass through our mortal existence, we all experience things; some of them really good, some of them not so good. The good ones we reinforce by thinking and savoring them from time to time. So they are a part of our past that we like to think about. The bad ones? Well we try not to think about those. With practice, we forget about them. Good thing too. But there are some memories that we are not so proud of that you can't forget. They stand out in your mind regardless of how you perceive their goodness, or badness. And so it is with Sven. Each time someone calls me "Sven" the memory is there; boldly asserting itself should I choose to think about it. It's just there, hanging in the wind; and it never goes away.

I arrived in Alaska in early 1957 wet behind the ears. I was part of a group of guys that was to take part in some cursory equipment training and then be sent out to man and operate the "White Alice" communications system. This was a system to link all the Aircraft Control and Warning radar stations sprinkled about Alaska with each other. It also served as an interface point for the DEW line at Cape Lisbourne on the Arctic coast which would alert the AC&W stations of any intruder. We worked for Federal Electric Corporation who had a contract with the Air Force to provide the O&M for the system. Good money for the time as all sites were from somewhat remote to all by itself on a mountain top. After 3 months in training at Anchorage, I spent some time at Kodiak and then was sent to a site on a mountain top called Kalakaket Creek. (A mountain called Kalakaket Creek? Naaaaa. Kal Creek just happens to be nearby. You can find it on a good map just 20 or so miles southeast of Galena in the center of Alaska.)



KALAKAKET CREEK WHITE ALICE STATION

Galena is a very small native village on the banks of the Yukon River. Its main claim to fame at the time was that it was home to a squadron of fighter planes ready to scramble at a moment's notice. They would also scramble if something screwed up in the communications link. They got lots of practice scrambling as we managed to screw it up enough! But I'm getting off the point here.

The station was in the final stages of construction when we arrived. There were maybe 40 or 50 construction men of different crafts there plus the support staff, (cooks, bakers, waiters, etc.). We had to live in Quonset huts down by the airstrip for a while while the living quarters were finished up. But, the combined mess/rec room was in good shape - enough so we could have a party each Friday and Saturday night after the movie. A plane would come in Friday afternoon with a case of whiskey and several cases of beer - just the right ingredients for a good hangover. It was also the start of the all weekend poker game. It started Friday after supper and didn't stop until Sunday after supper. And those guys knew how to build a pot. Thousand bucks on a turn of a card was not uncommon. But, this is beside the point.

I am somewhat musically inclined - I play the accordion.... but I can strum a guitar a few licks also. The mix was good at the time and I was welcomed by the crew....live music with plenty of booze! How good can it get? I have a middling voice and knew all the western music of the early 50s. And I knew all the good sing-along songs of the time. Bob Crutcher, our station manager, thought it was just great. He could really sing around midnight! As you might expect, I was well known quickly as the guy who played the accordion - no name - just the guy who played the accordion. Bob Crutcher had been a Captain in the Air Force and owned a plane which was kept down at the air strip. He always took it for a ride when the weather was good. One day he asked me to go along with him to a place called "Ruby". There was a trading post there and they claimed the distinction of having the only bar along the Yukon River, or at least the Alaska portion of it. So, a couple of us guys piled into his plane along with my accordion and away we went.



ACCORDION MAN

At Ruby, we buzzed the town indicating we were going to land at the air strip a mile or so away. Soon as we set down a jeep came up the road to take us into the village. The village of Ruby was very small consisting of one unpaved road running along the south bank of the Yukon River. Obviously we made straightaway to the Northern Commercial Trading Post to take advantage of the local oasis. Sure enough, after entering the store, (pretty much like a general country store), to the right was the bar - a plank across a couple of wooden barrels with a couple of stools. It was a cozy place as they had a potbellied stove stoked up with the necessary dog curled nearby. (I suppose I could say there was a grizzly miner there, northern lights out, and temperature at 50 below. But it wouldn't be true.) There was also an open area with a couple tables where a few people were having some coffee. Behind the bar there was a bottle of whiskey - that's all - just one bottle of whiskey. And you had your choice of drinks - straight whiskey, whiskey and water, whiskey and coke, or whiskey and 7. (I guess there were some wimps that would opt for just coke or 7 up - I was not a wimp!) Just as a side note, although we drank and sang throughout the evening, I never saw more than one bottle of whiskey behind the bar. Nor did I see the proprietor seek another. (The obvious answer is that I couldn't see!)

After a good evening meal and several rounds of drinks, I broke out the accordion and started things going. It didn't take too long before the whole village was there dancing up a storm! We were really in fine shape and everyone was really enjoying themselves. I handled every request that came my way and added a few of my own. Just as things were really getting good with everyone participating, a young Indian princess asked me if I could do something special for her. Sure thing. Elvis Presley? Huh???

Elvis and rock and roll were just taking off in the music world - definitely not something geared for the accordion. I stalled her off and kept up with other requests. But she was persistent. Finally I gave in and said OK.

I had a real good glow on - really into the music - and there was someone's guitar handy. I grabbed it, banged a couple chords, and then launched into "Blue Swede Shoes". The only thing is I put a little twist on it. I sang it with a very heavy Swedish accent! I had listened to my Dad talk with a Swedish accent all my life and could imitate him down to a tee.

Vun for da money - two for da show - tree to get ready - now go cat go!
And don't yoo (heavy accent on you) - step on my bloo(heavy accent here)
svede shoes. Yoo can do anything but stay off of a my bloo svede shoes...

Well, needless to say, this brought the house down! Everyone was laughing so hard. And Bob Crutcher was laughing the hardest. And it didn't stop there. There were several songs I sang in the heavy swede accent. One about the waitress and her logger lover - "Ders none like him today, if you'd pour viskey on it, he'd eat a bale of hay". They loved it. And Crutcher just howled.

But, after a bit it was time to get back to regular jitterbug with "In the Mood" and things like that. I went on until midnight or so reverting back to a few Swedish tunes just to keep the humor going. We put up in the local cabin that passed as an inn and slept soundly under a pile of blankets.

The next morning we arose to a fresh blanket of snow; maybe six inches or so. We had a good breakfast, which helped put out some of the fire in the belly. We were a little concerned about taking off in the snow but we had to get back. They couldn't clear the runway in time for us to leave so Crutcher decided to make a path with the plane.

We loaded up and started making passes down the strip going a little faster each time. I thought Bob was going to lift off the sixth pass but he cut the engine right at the point of no return. The seventh pass we made it and flew on back to Kal Creek. They had cleared the strip for us so there was no problem with our landing.

It didn't take long for Crutcher to related the festivities and put great emphasis on the Swedish accent bit. And, that night it was command performance time. I obliged. Bob called me "Sven, the mad Swede". It stuck with everyone as that was something they could remember. Now I wasn't the guy that played the accordion - I was Sven!

Each station was connected to the other with a party line orderwire, which was used to troubleshoot circuit problems between stations. Mostly it was used as a community BS line. Although it was set up as a dial up system, most stations just set up a speaker on the line. That way you could listen to anyone who was on the line and put your two cents in when you felt like it. Well, it didn't take long for the story to be related to the buddies I went through training with - and everyone else who was listening on line. Problem with a circuit on the eve shift? Call Sven! Maybe you can pull his leg a little - get a little swede talk out of him!

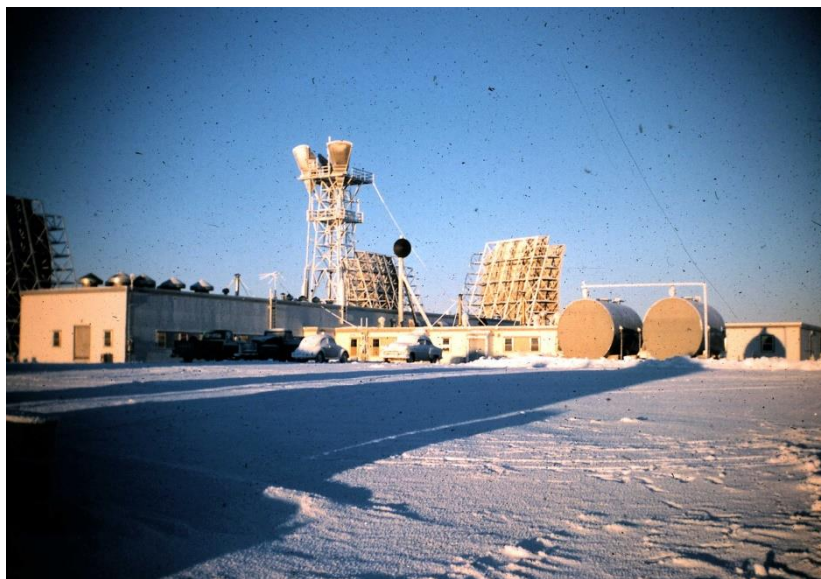
I was transferred from Kal Creek to Cape Lisbourne on the Arctic coast. I had to go via Fairbanks, Nome, and Kotzebue. Naturally the flights were such that I had to overnight at each place. I had a good buddy at the Nome site who met me at the plane. He and his wife were living in Nome and I spent the night at his place. Of course we had to go into the village for a

little bar hopping. We were doing just great at the Polar Bar when he said he had to go home but would be right back. True to his word he was - with my accordion! I played and they danced. A couple hours later a comely young Eskimo girl came up to me and shyly asked me if I could play something special for her. She even called me Sven! I knew what was coming. And I knew those guys had put her up to it! Once again it had the effect of a lot of laughter and general good feeling. I departed the next day for a six month stay 200 miles north of the Arctic circle.



CAPE LISBOURNE WHITE ALICE STATION

After my stay at Cape Lisburne I was transferred to a large, relatively empty station near Fairbanks called Pedro Dome. And it had a road into Fairbanks 25 miles away. The name Sven proceeded me, and it just stuck with me.



PEDRO DOME WHITE ALICE STATION

OK, Sven. That explains how you picked up the nickname. But that doesn't explain why you still have it. Lots of guys pick up nicknames in the military for various reasons. And when they get out of the service the name disappears. Why do you still use it?

Hmmmm..... Well..... That's another story. You have a little more time?

A very unlikely event changed my life even further at Pedro Dome - the station manager, Ralph Johnson, had a heart attack! And I had just agreed to be his assistant manager the day before. I was attending classes at the University of Alaska at the time, but that came to a screeching halt as I had to run the station in his absence. It was just a little site, 4 culinary people, 5 mechanics, (we generated our own power), half a dozen technicians, - and me. I was only 26 at the time and had to do some very serious maturing. No more entertainer - this was serious business here. I was just supposed to hold the place together until Ralph came back. Weeks ran into months and he finally retired under doctor's orders. Bill Miller, who was the Northern Alaska Sector Manager, felt I had done a good job but he could not keep me on as site manager as it would not be fair to others in the bush waiting for a good assignment. So I went to Kotzebue for a year as site manager.



KOTZEBUE WHITE ALICE STATION

The contract changed hands while I was in Kotzebue. RCA Service Company won the contract and I hired over. Andy Cowen, the new Operations Manager, asked me to go back to Pedro Dome as station manager. I agreed. By this time, the BMEWS station was being built at Clear, Alaska and, as a result, Pedro Dome was being filled with equipment and made into the biggest communications hub in the system. The site grew to about 25 people and I really had to knuckle down. I ran the site for 6 years. The site grew bigger and I took on more adjacent sites – Murphey Dome, Fairbanks ACS, Eielson, and Clear. Pedro Dome, being adjacent to Eielson AFB, became a showcase for visiting military. Hobnobbed with high military brass and all that goes with it. But people still called me Sven. They didn't know why. I was just Sven. Besides, it was a lot easier to say than “Engblom”.

There was a ski area just off the hill from Pedro Dome - Cleary Summit Ski area - where I learned to ski. The owner, Bob McCann, and I were on good talking terms as we were, in effect, neighbors. And when his sister came to visit him he introduced me to her. Jane - meet Sven. So started a courtship. It wasn't until after we were engaged that Jane found out my name was really Richard. She almost had a fit. "I will not go through life being part of Dick and Jane!" She figured we would be the butt of unimaginable jokes that would plague us from then on. So, Sven it was. Kinda hard to explain to my parents why Jane kept calling me "Sven" when they called me "Dicky"! Quite obvious why I stuck with Sven.

We stayed in Fairbanks for 5 years where Jane presented me with three wonderful children - Lisa, Maija, and Thor. (They hadn't themselves heard the full story of how my name came into being until they read this.)

In the fall of 66, I took on the job of SW Alaska Sector Manager and we moved to Anchorage. I found it was a huge mistake. I did not like being away from the "hands on" site activity and there was just too much travel involved going down the Aleutian chain to visit all the stations. So, just as the winter snows were starting to fall in October, we packed up the car and headed down the Alcan Highway - with two of three kids in diapers!

The use of the name Sven followed me throughout my life. But the story of how it came into being died in Alaska. I know, I know..... I could be just spinning some yarn..... taking some long ago events and really exaggerating on them. But, (as the humorist Dave Berry would say), I'm not making this up. It's all true! I couldn't make up anything so goofy.

And now you know..... I still play the accordion and can put on the Swedish accent anytime, but never do. Too conservative now. And no one would dare laugh at an old geezer talking funny. They would shake their heads knowingly saying "tsk, tsk, tsk". I even thought of legally changing my name to Sven. Too much trouble dealing with the government. Besides, I wouldn't have anything to talk about when someone asks, "How in the world did you ever get the name Sven"?

Richard (Sven) Engblom
1995